Artists (WV) – Blumbergs, Fannie Burgheim

Writer, painter, mother, friend

During her life, Fannie Blumberg supported of a variety of people. Following her death she continued to give.

Fannie Burgheim Blumberg, 1894-1964

Since 1986, March has been designated as Local Women in History month in Vigo County. Groups of women were recognized during four of those years and specific individuals were featured during the other seven. An individual, Fannie Burgheim Blumberg, is being remembered during this 12th annual event.

Fannie Louise, born Feb. 11, 1894, was the only child of Louis and Rachel Heims Burgheim. Louis Burgheim was a traveling watch salesman and jeweler, and, for a while was in business with his father, Rabbi David Burgheim, proprietor of the Indiana Optical & Jewelry Co. of Indianapolis. Rabbi Burgheim, a widower, "boarded" with his son.

Fannie described her grandfather as "an old man of German descent" who "was a scholar." One entire wall of his room, from floor to ceiling, was lined with books, she said, adding, "Many of the books were printed in German, French and Hebrew." Though "old and shabby and containing but few illustrations," they helped develop in Fannie a curiosity and love of reading that existed throughout her life. She was also fascinated by her grandfather's interest in the theater (he often invited her to accompany him), and by his friendship with their neighbor, James Whitcomb Riley.

At age 8, while attending public school, Fannie's parents permitted her to enroll at the John Herron School of Art. However, she became ill with measles, "with lengthy complications," and her parents had to forfeit the tuition already paid; they never proposed that she re-enroll. "After that, I didn't think about taking up art again until I got into high school and regularly passed John Herron on my way home. I used to look rather longingly at the pictures displayed there, and sometimes imagined myself a student. But I had to prepare to make a living, so I enrolled in Blaker's Kindergarten College. It was no solace to me that the art teacher there said I ought to study art seriously; I just couldn't at that time."

Fannie graduated from the two-year kindergarten course at the Teacher's College of Indianapolis in 1914 and from the additional one year primary course in 1915. These programs, operated by Eliza Blaker and others, were on the site that later became Butler University.

Fannie was a kindergarten teacher in Indianapolis when she met attorney Benjamin Blumberg of Terre Haute. They were married in August 1916. Their first home was a rented duplex at 429 Washington Ave. in Terre Haute, where their son, Morris, was born. By the time Rachel arrived, 15 months later, they were

See ***Blumberg,*** Page B2

By Helen Sapp
Special to the Tribune-Star

LOCAL WOMEN IN HISTORY

The agenda

Local Women in History month is sponsored by the Swope Art Museum, the Vigo County Historical Society, the Vigo County Public Library and the YWCA.

At the Swope, there will be an exhibit of some of Fannie Blumberg's paintings, as well as other pieces of art contributed by the Blumbergs.

The Historical Society will highlight gifts from the Blumbergs, including the famous kachina doll collection.

The library will feature a display of books by and about Fannie Blumberg. At noon March 13 at the library, Helen Sapp will discuss additional details of Fannie Blumberg's life, while William Littlejohn, director of the Blumberg Center, will talk briefly about the center.

Community

Blumberg • Continued from Page B1

living at 1633 S. Fifth; Teressa was born a couple years after Rachel, while the family lived at 712 S. Fifth. Morris recalls that they "moved to the farm" at the southeast corner of Fruitridge and Hulman, when he was 6 years old in about 1923. Gretchen was born about six years later. (Morris has returned to Terre Haute and is now living "at the farm." Rachel Norman and Teressa Hoffman live in California; Gretchen Tatelman lives in Florida.)

In an autobiographical sketch (about 1936), Fannie wrote: "I presume writing was my first hobby. I began a novel at the age of eight . . ." Her first children's story was published in Kindergarten Primary Magazine, April 1913. She continued to write, mostly for children, during her college years and while her own children were young, culminating in five published books and about 25 short stories. At least three of her books were illustrated by Mary Grosjean, a local artist. One, "Rowena Teena Tot and the Blackberries," was in its sixth printing by 1945. A few unpublished works for adults, including three poems, have been located.

In August 1936, during the month of their 20th wedding anniversary, Fannie and Ben assumed full responsibility for two more children, boys ages 12 and 13, who spoke essentially no English. Gerhard Nelhaus and Heinz Isenberg were members of Jewish families in Germany during the Nazi regime. Jewish women's organizations in this country and in countries of Europe, fearing for the lives of persons with Jewish backgrounds, made arrangements for some of the children to escape. For their plan to work, families in the receiving countries had to be willing to accept the children into their homes. Fortunately for Gerhard and Heinz, the Blumbergs volunteered.

Heinz stayed with the Blumbergs for about two years, until his family was able to resettle to the United States. By that time, Gerhard had learned that his father, an orthodox Rabbi, was in the Dachau concentration camp and his older brother had been "carted off to a labor gang." Ben Blumberg worked diligently, with the help of Indiana Congresswoman Virginia Jenckes, to obtain their release, and the entire family escaped to the United States in late August 1939.

Gerhard, with his family's blessing, stayed on with the Blumberg's, graduated from Wiley in January 1940 and entered Harvard with a scholarship the following fall. By January 1941, he had been drafted for a two-year stint in the Army. (He was not eligible for a college deferment, being considered an "enemy alien.") Gerhard became a pediatric neurologist. He now lives in California and has maintained close ties with his foster family.

Fannie Blumberg could be described as intellectually brilliant, artistically talented and a perpetual student who strived for perfection in everything she attempted. However, life was often difficult for Fannie, as well as those closest to her, because of a lifelong tendency to manic depression. The periods of depression became longer and more intense during her later years. Unfortunately, during her life very little was known about medical treatment of bipolar affective disorders.

In 1945, in a desperate attempt to help Fannie escape a period of depression, Ben presented her with art supplies and persuaded her to begin to paint. So, at age 50, she began a new phase of life, which she undertook with her usual high level of intensity for new projects. Quoting her friend, artist Gilbert Wilson: "She was never satisfied. Each time that she stopped painting for a few months, it was probably because she had exhausted some particular teacher and was ready for a new one. She was always stubbornly determined to improve on all of her previous efforts. In the 10 or 12 short years before her death, she had painted over 200 canvases, many quite large. And this is not to mention countless drawings, watercolors and lithographs." Although the location of many of her paintings is known, many were destroyed or given away without a record.

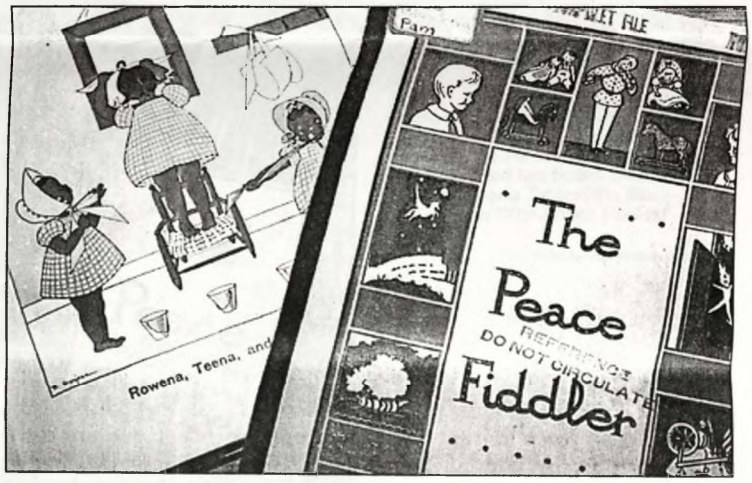
In "Enjoying Modern Art" by Sarah Newmeyer, published by the Reinhold Pub. Corp. in 1955, Fannie Blumberg was listed as an example of a professional artist (in contrast to a commercial artist). "Largely self-taught through her acquaintance with and keen observation of the work of leading modern artists in this country and abroad, she is far from being a so-called 'primitive' or native artist. She knows what she is doing and produces canvases, chiefly Expressionist in style, of superb color, boldly handled form and frequent emotional power."

Her paintings were exhibited at the DePauw University Art Center (1952, 1959, 1965); the Lowe Gallery, University of Miami (1952); the Sheldon Swope Art Gallery (1961); Rudolph Galleries, Woodstock in the Catskills (1952) and Coral Gables (1955); and the ISU Turman Art Gallery (1949, 1965).

Fannie died on July 9, 1964, at age 70, about five weeks before her 48th wedding anniversary. Wayne Crockett, her personal physician, reported she was sitting at the dinner table and choked on a piece of food. Coincidentally, her family indicated she had been severely depressed for several weeks and had been predicting her death.

During her life, Fannie was a generous supporter of a variety of people and charities, often anonymously. Following her death she continued to give, with the largest bequest being to provide the endowment used to establish the Blumberg Center for Interdisciplinary Studies in Special Education at Indiana State University.

Would she have been so concerned about the needs of others, especially children with mental ability and emotional problems, had she not felt so much personal anguish and despair? This is a question no biographer can answer. It is clear, however, that Fannie Burgheim Blumberg continues to contribute to the lives of others, both in the Terre Haute community and beyond.



Barry • Continued from Page B1

family practitioner who apparently has (1) access to medical research materials, and (2) a lot of spare time.

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Spring HOME IMPROVEMENT 1997

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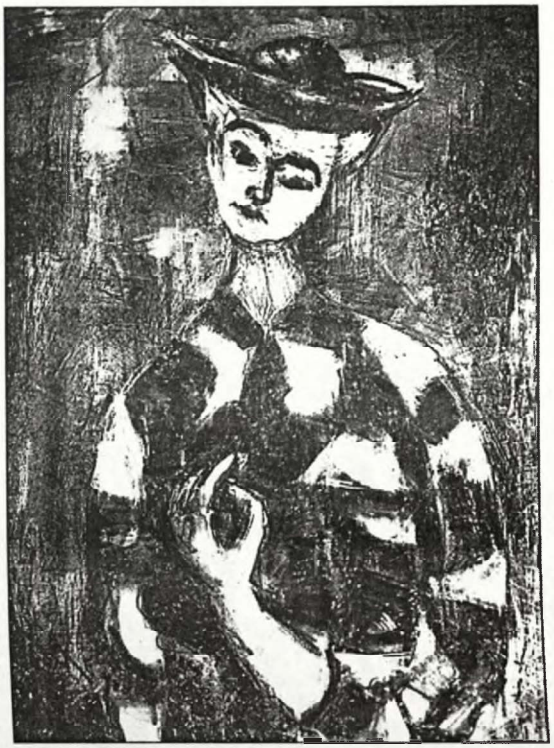

Contributions to life: Fannie Blumberg suffered from bouts of depression. During one bout, her husband, Ben gave her art supplies and persuaded her to paint. Above left is an oil titled "Velma Pratt," above is a lithograph titled " May Levan Rejoice." Blumberg also wrote children's books. Left are two books titled "Rowena Teena Tot and the Blackberries," and "The Peace Fiddler."

Tribune-Star/Bob Poynter

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